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LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION FOR COMMERCIAL PUPILS

ROWENA KEITH KEYES
Girls' High School, Brooklyn

The *English Journal* has contained articles dealing with the vexed question of "Business English," the central inquiry apparently being "Is there such a thing?" After two years of experience in investigating, through practical work, the question of what course in English is best adapted to commercial pupils, I venture humbly to contribute a brief report and opinion.

It seems to me that the whole question of business English is greatly modified by the conditions existing in the particular school where the course is given. On the one hand it is perfectly true that good English is good English whether it is in a business letter or in a literary essay, but the means best adapted to securing the use of good English on the part of pupils will depend on specific conditions. In the commercial course of the Girls' High School, Brooklyn, it has become evident that the special conditions to be considered are: First, that the course is only three years long as compared with four years of the academic course; second, that the majority of the pupils choosing the commercial course are less intellectual than those choosing the academic course; third, that the uses to which they will put their knowledge of English in the first year out of high school (in the business office) require that special emphasis be laid on certain features of good English which would not be emphasized if the pupils had longer time for development.

The two purposes which the course in English for commercial pupils must chiefly emphasize are, first, accuracy and intelligence in the writing of business letters; and, second, the development of general intelligence and ability to grasp ideas from the printed page, to be obtained through wide general reading. The second

of these purposes is necessary for the establishment of good citizenship, but it is not less essential for satisfactory service in the business world.

Concerning our means of securing the first of these purposes, I shall have little to say except to point out that such suggestions as are often found in the *English Journal*, with regard to vitalizing letter-writing, have been verified by us in our experience. Pupils of one class correspond with pupils of another class, and so secure human interest together with criticism from a fellow-pupil. The bookkeeping department correlates its work with that of the English department, so that letters frequently pass through both departments to be corrected for subject-matter in one and for English in the other.

Each term a definite goal is set as to subject-matter and form. In 1A, for instance, only letters ordering goods, sales letters, and letters opening accounts are attempted, and the transactions represented are put in terms which are within the comprehension of the very small girls who enter high school. As to form the emphasis in that term is laid upon correct headings and conclusions, neat appearance, and the elimination of the "baby blunder" or running together of sentences. Thus from term to term special errors are eliminated or at least greatly reduced through this defining of the aim.

Each term a letter-writing test is carried on, pupils of one grade being given a certain subject on which they are to write in class, prizes being offered for each grade. We try to adapt subjects to the stage of the pupils' development, so that letters may be natural and original though involving real business problems. For example, the following subjects were given in May, 1917:

1A. *The best sales letter*: Imagine that you have raised flowers or vegetables yourself in the school garden or at home. Write a letter dated the middle of July, 1917, in which you try to induce a neighbor to buy from you. State the quantity which you are prepared to offer, quality, and price.

1B. *A letter of complaint*: Your dressmaker has just sent your new dress. Write to her a courteous letter, explaining just why it is not entirely satisfactory and according to agreement.

2A. Suppose that the Annex is to have a "park day," with relay races, folk dances, and an outdoor play. Write a letter to the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, explaining the interest of the occasion, and asking that a reporter be sent to write up the events on the day when they occur. Be more definite in your statement than these directions are.

2B. A girl friend living in the country writes to you to say that she is about to move to Brooklyn, and wishes to take up commercial work in high school, having completed her elementary course. She asks that you will explain to her the purpose and scope of our course here, and advise her as to the relative values of this course and the academic for a girl who is to earn her own living otherwise than by teaching.

This year the subjects will all be connected in some way with the war.

The second purpose stated, that of securing general intelligence and ability to read independently and to judge the relative value of books, we try to secure through an emphasis upon individual reading-lists rather than upon the completion of classroom reading. Enough books are prescribed for the entire class to give a central interest to the term's work, and these are for the most part chosen from the so-called classics, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, George Eliot, etc.; but besides these books, each pupil is required to read at least six books each term, stating at the beginning of the term whether she is fond of reading or finds reading difficult. The list is then judged from the point of view of the progress of the pupils toward higher standards of reading. Considerable class time is devoted to oral reports and discussion of the books read, several girls joining in giving partial reports on one book, or each girl taking an individual book as seems best at the time. Another method of testing the knowledge of the pupils' reading is to have a "reading aloud day," when they may choose passages from the books that they are reading, and after giving a brief introductory speech, may read to the class passages which they consider most interesting. Such work is generally organized through a committee of the class itself. The reading lists are preserved and commented on from term to term, so that they give accurate evidence of the progress

of the pupils. In the third year the girls are introduced to the newspapers and the magazines, more particularly than has been done in the earlier years. Through the reading of the newspapers the pupils are led to distinguish between the story and the essay. After this it is an easy matter to arouse an interest in popular essays of the day. This year articles on the war have particular interest, but at all times the writings of Agnes Repplier, Samuel Crothers, and Simeon Strunsky open up a new field of interest to girls who have heretofore found pleasure almost exclusively in fiction. Later a few essays of Irving and Addison are read by the class to bring out the fact that in every age someone has "commented on the life around him" just as do these writers of today. The result has been a striking interest in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and an appreciation of the humor to be found in classical writers, which would never have been developed except through the use of present-day essays. There are new developments every term in such individual work, and space would fail me to tell of the pleasure found in the discussion of nineteenth-century novelists versus those of the present day, Irish Players versus Goldsmith, and similar questions which arouse the greatest enthusiasm among the pupils. I wish, however, to indicate the independence with which the pupils read and judge when turned loose among modern essays, by appending a few answers to a test question given in the 3A Division. The girls are about fifteen or sixteen years old, and mostly of foreign parentage.

Question: Give purpose and a general idea of the subject-matter of three essays used for home reading.

First answer: The purpose of Agnes Repplier's "Children's Poets" in the book called "Essays in Idleness" is to show that children love poetry more than grown-ups, for the children love poetry by instinct while grown-ups read more of prose than poetry because they have judgment and reasoning powers. Children do not like poetry written for children but poetry written for elders. Many great authors as children were enthused by poetry of great poets who lived before them. This essay is instructive.

The purpose of "War Poetry" by Agnes Repplier is to show that in former days poetry written about war spoke only of the bravery but today the people do not write of the

bravery because they know of the horrors. In former days there were two kinds of poetry, love and war, but today there are many kinds. It is instructive.

"Reading for a Grandfather" by Howells shows that many modern girls read modern books and do not know the best literature. It is amusing and instructive.

Second answer: Agnes Repplier's "A Plea for Humor" was written, I think, for the purpose of showing the people of today their utter lack of humor for things which would, in former days, have excited the greatest laughter and pleasure among these humorists who are found with difficulty in this age of seriousness and lack of light-heartedness.

Samuel Crothers' "Convention of the Books" was an interesting essay in which the books of various ages and days of fame gather together and talk of their readers. They talk of some industrious student or great literary man who once read in their mighty volumes, but then left them for some book; they discuss the class of readers they like best, and express their disdain for some who simply read in a light, indifferent way, and then get the wrong purpose and meaning of the book. This idea of having "A Convention of Books" was only another way to express the author's own personal views of the classes of readers who dip into the deep and instructive books of great writers.

Strunsky's "Cowards" tried to point out to the reader that death is not, as everyone seems inclined to believe, the worst thing in life, or the greatest fear that any man feels. This he does by giving the opinions of men, who fear something that one would not think could hold fear for a man.

Third answer: Agnes Repplier's "In the Dozy Hours" deals with old customs which are being ridiculed or dropped and she points out why they should not be dropped. The purpose is to keep some of the old customs which are better than the new.

In Strunsky's "Belshazzar Court" he tells of things which surround him in a large apartment house. He writes of what he sees about him everyday. I think the purpose is to train us to notice everything about us, and to show us a humorist's view of apartment-house life.

Helen Keller's essays tell of the life of the blind people. I think the purpose is to tell normal people that the blind people are not as helpless as we make them.

In this same test the following essays were referred to by the different pupils. (The inaccuracies have not been corrected.)

A Happy Half-Century	Agnes Repplier
Maeterlink's Symbolism	Henry Rose
American Newspaper	Charles Dudley Warner
Patient Observer	Strunsky
Heroines of Fiction	Howells
The Street	Strunsky
The Custom Officer	Repplier
Old Maids	Mark Twain
A Conversation between Franklin and the Gout	Benj. Franklin
Gifts	Emerson
The Little Violinist	Thomas B. Aldrich
George Eliot's "Rose Lydgate"	Howells
Charity	Repplier
Advantages of Being Disliked	Dunphine
Belshazzar Court	Strunsky
Furnace and I	Atlantic Essays
Consolation for the Old Bachelor	Francis Hopkinson
Essays	Emerson
Out of the Dark	Helen Keller
A Praise of Laziness	Frank Crane
Brooklyn	Strunsky
The Greatest of These Is Charity	Agnes Repplier
A Study of Romeo	Chapman
In the Dozy Hours	Repplier
Essays	Helen Keller
Stage Lions	Addison
The School of Polite Unlearning	Crothers
The Ignominy of Being Grown-up	Southern
On Riches	Bacon
The Building of a Ship	John Ruskin
London, the City of Churches	Charles Dickens
A Plea for Humor	Repplier
Convention of the Books	Samuel Crothers
Cowards	Strunsky
The First Distiller	Tolstoi
American Motherhood	Roosevelt
Prue and I	Curtis
The Fir Tree	Lucas
Imaginary Interviews	Howell
Family Portraits	Curtis

Essays on Books	Phelps
Children's Poets	Repplier
Reading for a Grandfather	Howells
American Ideals	Mabie
Sesame and Lillies	John Ruskin
Gondola Days	Smith
In Our Convent Days	Repplier

I add also the pupils' lists of their reading for three terms. These are selected without regard to the pupil's standing in class. The mistakes are the pupils'. These lists are intended to show that the girls tell frankly of all their reading, whether classical or popular, and that the tendency is for the proportion of good reading to increase as the terms go by.

FIRST PUPIL

Grade 2A

Fothergill: First Violin	Burnett: T. Tembarom
Brontë: Jane Eyre	Porter: Harvester
Cummins: Lamplighter	Dixon: Clansman
Craik: John Halifax, Gentleman	Dixon: Traitor
Dickens: Tale of Two Cities	Shakespeare: Midsummer-Night's Dream
Thurston: Masquerador	Shakespeare: Twelfth Night
Thurston: Gambler	Shakespeare: Much Ado About Nothing
Brown: Rose MacCleod	Warner: Golden House
Brown: Judgment	Wharton: House of Mirth
Brown: Sword of Youth	Wilkins: By the Light of the Soul
Eggleston: Carolina Cavalier	London: Burning Daylight
Harben: Pole Baker	London: Game
Austen: Sense and Sensibility	Bolton: Girls Who Became Famous
Barr: Maid of Maiden Lane	
Barr: Bow of Orange Ribbon	
Crawford: Noble Life	

Grade 2B

Allen: Kentucky Cardinal	Longfellow: Evangeline
Allen: Cathedral Singer	Longfellow: Miles Standish
Fox: Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come	Poe: The Gold Bug
Fox: Trail of the Lonesome Pine	Shakespeare: King Lear
Harrison: Angela's Business	Shakespeare: Othello
Harrison: Queed	Wallace: Ben Hur
Harrison: V.V.'s Eyes	Riis: Neighbors

FIRST PUPIL—*Continued*

Grade 3A

Brontë: Tenant of Wildfell Hall	Strunsky: Psychology of Shopping
Antin: Promised Land	Repplier: War and Children
Austin: Pride and Prejudice	Martin: Father to His Freshman Son
Dole: Life of Tolstoi	Morrow: Things to Tell the Merchant.
Hawthorne: Marble Faun	Contributor's Club: Made Over Music
Eliot: Daniel Deronda	
Eliot: Mill on the Floss	

SECOND PUPIL

Grade 2A

Riis: The Making of an American	Dickens: A Tale of Two Cities
Fouque: Undine	Bronte: Jane Eyre
Crawford: Roman Singer	Tarkington: Monsieur Beaucaire
Crawford: Stradella	

Grade 2B

Harrison: V.V.'s Eyes	Whittier: Snowbound
Hawthorne: The Chimaera	Fox: The Trail of the Lonesome Pine
Hawthorne: The Golden Touch	Pankhurst: My Own Story
Irving: The Legend of Sleepy Hollow	

Grade 3A

Austin: Pride and Prejudice	Barret O'Hara: State License Plan
Repplier: Points of View	Adams: Twenty Years at Hull House
Repplier: Fiction in the Pupil	Wald: The House on Henry Street
Repplier: English Railway Fiction	Stevenson: The Merry Men
<i>Atlantic Monthly</i> : Endicott and I	Kipling: The Light That Failed

THIRD PUPIL

Grade 2A

Shakespeare: Taming the Shrew	Antin: Promised Land
Eliot: Mill on the Floss	Burnett: Secret Garden
Browning: How They Brought the Good News from Aix	Reed: Happy Women

Grade 2B

Allen: A Cathedral Singer	Poe: The Black Cat. The Raven
Emerson: The Fable. The Storm	Shakespeare: King Lear
Goldsmith: Vicar of Wakefield	Riis: Children of the Tenements

Grade 3A. Books Suggested by Teacher

Brontë: The Professor	Strunsky: Manhattan Labyrinths
Repplier: Counter-Currents	Strunsky: Belshazzar Courts
Repplier: Two Essays	Palmer: Life of Alice Freeman Palmer
Repplier: Our Overrated Grandmothers	

THIRD PUPIL—Continued

Other Books

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| Barton: Story of the Red Cross | <i>World's Work</i> , vol. 27: Red Cross |
| Boardman: Under the Red Cross | Article |
| Flag at Home and Abroad | Henderson: Modern Methods of |
| <i>Review of Reviews</i> , March 1915: Red | Charity. Red Cross Article |
| Cross Article | |
| <i>Survey</i> , February 17, 1917: Red Cross | |
| Article | |

FOURTH PUPIL

Grade 2A

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|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Shakespeare: Twelfth Night | Barr: Bow of the Orange Ribbon |
| Riis: Making of an American | Harben: Ann Boyd |
| Meadowlark: Joan of Arc | Montgomery: Anne of Green Gables |
| Eliot: Mill on the Floss | Montgomery: Anne of Avonlea |
| Crawford: The Undesired Woman | Montgomery: Chronicles of Avonlea |
| Dickens: Dombey and Son, vol. 1 | Porter: Pollyanna |
| Barr: Maid of Maiden Lane | Porter: The Harvester |
| Barr: Maid of Old New York | Dickens: David Copperfield, vol. 1 |

Grade 2B

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet | Dickens: Oliver Twist |
| Thackeray: Vanity Fair | Dickens: Dombey and Son, vol. 2 |
| Fox: Little Shepherd of Kingdom | Harben: Dixie Hart |
| Come | Harben: Paul Rundel |
| Longfellow: Evangeline | Harben: Pole Baker |
| Irving: The Spectre Bridegroom | Fox: Trail of the Lonesome Pine |
| Riis: Neighbors | Munsterburg: On the Witness Stand |
| Sheridan: The Rivals | Dickens: David Copperfield |
| Goldsmith: She Stoops to Conquer | |

3A. Books Suggested by Teacher

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|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Mark Twain: Pudd'nhead Wilson | Hardy: Under the Greenwood Tree |
| Strunsky: Manhattan Labyrinth | Red Cross Bulletin |
| Boardman: Under the Red Cross | Curtis: Prue and I |
| Flag Home and Abroad | |

Other Books

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Harben: Mam's Linda | Twain: Tom Sawyer Abroad |
| Goldsmith: Essays | Kipling: The Light that Failed |
| Seawell: Diary of a Beauty | Nicholus: Otherwise Phyllis |